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PASADENA STAR-NEWS

Press Club

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1. Records detail toxic dumping**Plaintiffs will use 1940s-'60s documents in lawsuit against JPL**By Robin Lloyd
STAFF WRITER

PASADENA — The Jet Propulsion Laboratory was disposing of toxic chemicals in the Arroyo Seco as early as the 1940s, documents obtained Wednesday show.

In a 1946 letter, JPL acknowledged disposing of chemicals such as nitric acid and hydrazine hydrate in the arroyo. Subsequent city inspection reports detail other pollutants ranging from petroleum derivatives to explosive effluent of unknown composition, documents show.

The inspection reports and correspondence date from 1946 through the 1960s and were obtained by this newspaper

CHEMICAL CORRESPONDENCE

Inspection reports and correspondence from 1946 through the 1960s show the following:

■ In 1946, a Caltech staffer reported that 10 gallons of nitric acid, 10 gallons of aniline, 4 gallons of hydrogen peroxide and other chemicals were washed down with water each month "to the stream bed" in the Arroyo Seco, diluted with large quantities of

water.

■ A 1948 letter from city Chief Engineer Morris S. Jones to V.C. Larsen, JPL's administrator, warned against disposing chemical waste in the arroyo stream channel and JPL cesspools.

■ A 1948 Water Department report stated that, "Evidently, the Arroyo is considered to be more or less of a catch-all when any clean up is to be done."

from the Pasadena Department of Water and Power under the California Public Records Act.

The papers represent key evidence

that plaintiffs will use in a lawsuit that claims toxic chemicals from JPL caused Hodgkin's disease and other illnesses in at least four people who lived or attended

school near the lab, an attorney said Wednesday.

George Alexander, JPL public affairs manager, said the lab "always adhered to whatever legal and accepted methods of disposal were prevalent at the time."

"We did the work and we're not aware of any disposal that could have led to harmful contamination of the ground water," he said.

He added that JPL will fight the lawsuit and said that there is no link between Hodgkin's disease and the industrial degreasers and other chemicals the laboratory disposed of in the 1940s and '50s.

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RECORDS

Correspondence shows city's concerns

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The documents obtained Wednesday show city officials were concerned about JPL's disposal practices at that time.

In response to city requests, Caltech, which operates the lab, wrote the city's chief plumbing inspector on May 27, 1946. The letter says JPL was monthly disposing 10 gallons of nitric acid, 10 gallons of aniline, four gallons of hydrogen peroxide, four gallons of nitro methane, a gallon of methyl alcohol and a half gallon of hydrazine hydrate.

The letter states the industrial chemicals were diluted in large amounts of wash water before being put in the arroyo.

"It is the opinion of all concerned, for what it is worth, that in no case could the waste serve as a means of contamination to the water supply," states the letter, signed on behalf of Caltech by L.G. Fenner.

On Oct. 1, 1948, a letter from then-city Chief Engineer Morris S. Jones to V.C. Larsen, JPL's administrator, refers to a meeting between city and JPL officials regarding "the concern of the City of Pasadena regarding disposal of plant waste into the Arroyo Seco stream channel and also into cesspools from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory

'It seems clear that JPL and Caltech were acting in conscious disregard of the rights of their neighbors.'

Clifford Pearson, co-counsel for the plaintiffs in the current lawsuit

property."

Since 1990, NASA has paid for the operation of the Devil's Gate Groundwater Treatment Plant near JPL that strips chemicals from Arroyo water near disposal sites used during the lab's earlier days.

JPL has never officially accepted responsibility for well contamination.

The Caltech-managed lab was placed on the Superfund National Priority List in 1993 and studies to determine the extent of the lab's responsibility for well-water contamination remain incomplete.

However, the city's files contain a number of documents relating to discharges into the arroyo by JPL:

An Aug. 26, 1948, inspection report by the DWP found a "black, coal-tar-like substance with a strong objectionable odor resembling that of petroleum derivatives." The same report noted a "yellow oily substance," "some white deposit in the streambed," and "a dark, odorless, pigment-like material."

The report states the inspector, George Owen, said he had "been warned not to drive his Jeep across the flowing stream because of the explosive nature of the effluent at those particular times."

A Sept. 7, 1948, DWP report

states that, "Evidently, the Arroyo is considered to be more or less of a catch-all when any cleanup is to be done."

A 1961 Water Department memo notes that yellow waste discharged from a JPL storm drain was found to originate from chrome present in cooling-tower waste discharge.

The correspondence between the city and the lab indicates that lab managers knew there was concern over toxic dumping for decades, said Clifford Pearson of the Tarzana law firm Wasserman, Comden & Casselman, co-counsel for the plaintiffs in the current lawsuit.

"It seems clear that JPL and Caltech were acting in conscious disregard of the rights of their neighbors," he said.

Pearson and lawyer Tom Girardi won a toxics lawsuit against Lockheed Martin last year that resulted in \$60 million in cash settlements for nearly 1,300 neighbors of its former military airplane manufacturing plant in Burbank.

The lawsuit against JPL, filed in January, involves four plaintiffs, including Glendale resident Anita Salvo, whose daughter Francesca died of Hodgkin's disease in 1989. The mother is suing for wrongful death.

The other two plaintiffs were schoolmates of Francesca Salvo

in the 1970s at St. Bede Catholic School, within a mile of JPL.

After the lawsuit against JPL became public last year, a number of local Hodgkin's victims who grew up around the Arroyo Seco came forward to say they, too, suspect their disease might be related to chemical dumping.

South Pasadena resident William Skaff said his wife, Carol Lewis, lived in La Canada Flintridge, went to La Canada High School, had a career as a graphic designer and died of Hodgkin's in October 1985 at the age of 33.

Her name is among 11 others expected to be added to the lawsuit, attorneys said.

"There is a very real potential here that she was contaminated by this toxic waste and that she could have been victimized by that," Skaff said.

The Water and Power Department in 1960 found unacceptable amounts of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene in the city's Arroyo Well near JPL. The well was temporarily shut down.

Subsequent testing at three adjacent wells yielded relatively high levels of so-called "volatile organic compounds," and those wells also were temporarily shut down in 1965 and 1969.

The wells now are all in use.

Dispersion of the chemicals over the years and blending of the tainted water with water from other sources has brought down the level of toxins to below state thresholds for drinking water, said Brad Boman, principal civil engineer for water quality at the DWP.

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